Tree of Life – Rooted in Love

At our April session meeting, the first meeting after our new church name had been chosen, I began by asking the elders to draw a picture of the tree of life. There were varied levels of artistic ability in the room and there were varied ideas about the specifics of what the tree looked like. Most of the trees shared one thing in common, a thing that surprised me a little. The trees had roots in our drawings.

The reason that surprised me is that the roots of a tree are the part you don’t usually see. They extend deep under the ground. They serve as the tree’s support system, rooting it so it can stand in the most severe storm. They serve as the avenue for water and nutrients drawn from the earth to keep the tree alive and growing. Roots are vital to the tree’s life and health, but they are, for the most part, invisible. It seemed significant to me that, invisible as roots are, we all knew how important they are to our tree of life.

As important as the roots themselves are, the ground they grow in is equally important. Sandy soil is loose and hard to take deep root in. Soil that is mostly clay is hard for the roots to push their way through so they can’t grow as they should. Jesus, who must have spent some time in the fields, describes in the parable of the sower how the seeds that fall the hard-beaten path never even get a chance to sprout because the birds eat them, and the seeds that fall on rocky ground are never able to can’t get those roots down deep and so they wither in the sun.

Now, there is an interpretation of this parable in the Bible, but I’d like to look at it from a slightly different perspective this morning as we think about the people and the church we are called to be. What might keep us from growing those deep strong nourishing roots that will help us to grow in every good way? I think of the hard-beaten soil of intolerance and judgement that might keep us closed and hard against those who are different from us, whether that difference is a difference in behavior and ability, or a difference in race or culture, or a difference in political perspective. I think of the “get rich quick” or “one simple step to a perfect life” programs that are out there both for people and for churches that promise a quick easy solution to all life’s problems, that may give us a boost for a day or even for a year but have nothing to nourish us with for the long term, and so we wither away. I think of all the weeds that might choke us – all the things to be afraid of, all the reasons why we couldn’t possibly do it that way, starting with “we’ve never done that before”, all the self-doubt that comes because others tell us we can’t and so we never even try to grow.

But then I think of the other part of the parable – of the seed that fell on good soil and put down deep, strong roots and grew thirty, sixty, even a hundred times bigger than it had been to start with. Now, that’s the soil I want!

In an actual garden, that soil is rich with organic material, loose and moist and free of rocks. What would it be made of for the tree of life growing in God’s garden? Ephesians suggests that the soil in which God would have us rooted and grounded is love. Not just any love, but “the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge”. That is his prayer for the church.

What does it mean to be rooted and grounded in love? Think of a child who is loved by her parents – loved not in a way that smothers or pumps the child up to think she is more than she are, but loved in a way that sees her as she is, loves her anyway and supports her as she grows in knowledge and compassion. That child who is rooted and grounded in love is able to make her way through the world – even in a world that is not always kind – knowing that she has been loved, and therefore is able to love others as she has been loved, no strings attached. She is rooted in love, and nothing can take that away from her.

Or think of a marriage that has endured more than fifty years – years of shared struggles and shared joys, of giving and forgiving, of learning the ways of another person as well as you know your own. Think how much deeper and stronger the roots of that love are, how much more firmly they hold and support the couple, than they did when they first made their vows to one another all those years ago. Through their love and the strength of their roots in love, the couple in turn strengthens and passes on their love to all who know them. Both of those examples are roots of love limited by the human lifespan. They go back only one generation.

Now imagine roots that go back much deeper – to the beginning of time, when God created human beings in love. Generation after generation those roots grew stronger and deeper, as God made covenant with God’s people, set them free from slavery, brought them home from exile, gave them a law for how they should live. When God came to us in Jesus, those roots of love had a growth spurt, growing twice as deep and strong as they had before, not only because Jesus taught us what love looks like, but in giving himself for us, he showed us what love is. Over time, those roots continue to grow as the Spirit works through the church, in acts of compassion, in words of justice and of mercy, in loved showed in the body of Christ and as the body of Christ reaches out to the world. If we are truly rooted and grounded in a soil of love that is that deep and that rich, how can we not grow and flourish?

History professor Sarah Irving-Stonebreaker tells how she was raised in a secular but ethical family in Australia. As a scholar, she was faced with the question of how human worth is valued. She found that her conviction that all human life is valuable was not supported by a secular position. It was not a universal human value. Being a student, she found herself in the theology section of the library and started reading. There she encountered for the first time the power of the gospel. But it wasn’t until she got a teaching position in the United States that she really saw the church at work: I was able to see an active Christianity in people who lived their lives guided by the gospel: feeding the homeless every week, running community centres, and housing and advocating for migrant farm laborers. She entered a church for the first time. In prayer, she met the unconditional love of Jesus and offered herself to him. She began to know the radical nature of the love of Jesus Christ, and to live and act for other s in the light of that love herself.

I tell this story because it was the church rooted in Christ’s love and acting in Christ’s love for all people, especially the “least of these”, that finally drew Sarah to a life of Christian faith. This is a story of conversion, yes, but also a story of the power of the witness of a church rooted in love.

This is a witness that is needed now more than ever, in a world where in Portland this week two men were stabbed to death as they defended two women against a right-wing extremist, in a world where in Manchester, England a suicide bomber blew himself up, killing and injuring teenaged concert-goers, in a world where in Egypt Christians on the way to church on Friday were massacred. In the face of violence and hatred like that, we must show another way – a way rooted and grounded in love. We here at Tree of Life may not be able to change the whole world by ourselves, but we can impact our small corner. As we plant and tend our garden for others, as we welcome those with varied abilities and disabilities in coffeehouse each week, as we strive to love one another as Christ has loved us, as we day by day bear witness in our daily lives to the grace we have ourselves received and share with others, then we do make a statement that there is another way, the way of love. May all the world – or at least our neighborhood – affirm that we are indeed Christians as we live grounded in Christ’s love.